



Billions Spent on Afghan Army Ultimately Benefited Taliban

By: Robert Burns

August 17, 2021

<https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-army-taliban-995b069a9008690582cb34f4cadc8515>

Built and trained at a two-decade cost of \$83 billion, Afghan security forces collapsed so quickly and completely — in some cases without a shot fired — that the ultimate beneficiary of the American investment turned out to be the Taliban. They grabbed not only political power but also U.S.-supplied firepower — guns, ammunition, helicopters and more.

The Taliban captured an array of modern military equipment when they overran Afghan forces who failed to defend district centers. Bigger gains followed, including combat aircraft, when the Taliban rolled up provincial capitals and military bases with stunning speed, topped by capturing the biggest prize, Kabul, over the weekend.

A U.S. defense official on Monday confirmed the Taliban's sudden accumulation of U.S.-supplied Afghan equipment is enormous. The official was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and so spoke on condition of anonymity. The reversal is an embarrassing consequence of misjudging the viability of Afghan government forces — by the U.S. military as well as intelligence agencies — which in some cases chose to surrender their vehicles and weapons rather than fight.

The U.S. failure to produce a sustainable Afghan army and police force, and the reasons for their collapse, will be studied for years by military analysts. The basic dimensions, however, are clear and are not unlike what happened in Iraq. The forces turned out to be hollow, equipped with superior arms but largely missing the crucial ingredient of combat motivation.

“Money can't buy will. You cannot purchase leadership,” John Kirby, chief spokesman for Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, said Monday.

Doug Lute, a retired Army lieutenant general who help direct Afghan war strategy during the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, said that what the Afghans received in tangible resources they lacked in the more important intangibles.

“The principle of war stands — moral factors dominate material factors,” he said. “Morale, discipline, leadership, unit cohesion are more decisive than numbers of forces and equipment. As outsiders in Afghanistan, we can provide materiel, but only Afghans can provide the intangible moral factors.” By contrast, Afghanistan's Taliban insurgents, with smaller numbers, less sophisticated weaponry and no air power, proved a superior force. U.S. intelligence agencies largely underestimated the scope of that superiority, and even after President Joe Biden announced in April he was withdrawing all U.S. troops, the intelligence agencies did not foresee a Taliban final offensive that would succeed so [spectacularly](#).

“If we wouldn't have used hope as a course of action, ... we would have realized the rapid drawdown of U.S. forces sent a signal to the Afghan national forces that they were being abandoned,” said Chris Miller, who saw combat in Afghanistan in 2001 and was acting secretary of defense at the end of President Donald Trump's term.

Stephen Biddle, a professor of international and public affairs at Columbia University and a former adviser to U.S. commanders in Afghanistan, said Biden's announcement set the final collapse in motion.

“The problem of the U.S. withdrawal is that it sent a nationwide signal that the jig is up — a sudden, nationwide signal that everyone read the same way,” Biddle said. Before April, the Afghan government troops were slowly but steadily losing the war, he said. When they learned that their American partners were going home, an impulse to give up without a fight “spread like wildfire.”

The failures, however, go back much further and run much deeper. The United States tried to develop a credible Afghan defense establishment on the fly, even as it was fighting the Taliban, attempting to widen the political foundations of the government in Kabul and seeking to establish democracy in a country rife with corruption and cronyism.

Year after year, U.S. military leaders downplayed the problems and insisted success was coming. Others saw the handwriting on the wall. In 2015 a professor at the Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute wrote about the military’s failure to learn lessons from past wars; he subtitled his book, “Why the Afghan National Security Forces Will Not Hold.”

“Regarding the future of Afghanistan, in blunt terms, the United States has been down this road at the strategic level twice before, in Vietnam and Iraq, and there is no viable rationale for why the results will be any different in Afghanistan,” Chris Mason wrote. He added, presciently: “Slow decay is inevitable, and state failure is a matter of time.”

Some elements of the Afghan army did fight hard, including commandos whose heroic efforts are yet to be fully documented. But as a whole the security forces created by the United States and its NATO allies amounted to a “house of cards” whose collapse was driven as much by failures of U.S. civilian leaders as their military partners, according to Anthony Cordesman, a longtime Afghanistan war analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The Afghan force-building exercise was so completely dependent on American largesse that the Pentagon even paid the Afghan troops’ salaries. Too often that money, and untold amounts of fuel, were siphoned off by corrupt officers and government overseers who cooked the books, creating “ghost soldiers” to keep the misspent dollars coming.

Of the approximately \$145 billion the U.S. government spent trying to rebuild Afghanistan, about \$83 billion went to developing and sustaining its army and police forces, according to the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, a congressionally created watchdog that has tracked the war since 2008. The \$145 billion is in addition to \$837 billion the United States spent fighting the war, which began with an invasion in October 2001.

The \$83 billion invested in Afghan forces over 20 years is nearly double last year’s budget for the entire U.S. Marine Corps and is slightly more than what Washington budgeted last year for food stamp assistance for about 40 million Americans.

In his book, “The Afghanistan Papers,” journalist Craig Whitlock wrote that U.S. trainers tried to force Western ways on Afghan recruits and gave scant thought to whether U.S. taxpayers dollars were investing in a truly viable army.

“Given that the U.S. war strategy depended on the Afghan army’s performance, however, the Pentagon paid surprisingly little attention to the question of whether Afghans were willing to die for their government,” he wrote.

This story also appeared in [Click Orlando](#), [US News](#), [LA Times](#), [9News Australia](#), [Baltimore Sun](#), [Military Times](#), [KTBS](#), [CBS19](#), [Spectrum Local News Charlotte](#), [ABC News](#)



Taliban accumulate U.S.- supplied firepower after Afghan collapse

Erin Doherty

August 17, 2021

<https://www.axios.com/taliban-us-military-equipment-afghanistan-bf8f0dbf-34e2-4fbd-ad85-8f3184b42475.html>

The Taliban accumulated an enormous amount of U.S.-supplied guns, ammunition, helicopters, combat aircraft and more after Afghan security forces collapsed this weekend, AP [reports](#).

Why it matters: The U.S. spent billions of dollars over two decades to train and support the Afghan security forces, but the Taliban was the ultimate beneficiary of the decades-long investments.

- Asked Monday if the U.S. is taking any steps to ensure military equipment does not fall into the hands of the Taliban, Pentagon logistics specialist Maj. Gen. Hank Taylor [told reporters](#): "I don't have the answer to that question."

Driving the news: The Taliban captured modern military equipment when they overran Afghan forces across the country.

- The Taliban accumulated firepower — including guns, ammunition and helicopters — from district centers.
- They experienced bigger gains, including acquiring combat aircraft, when they toppled provincial capitals and military bases.

What they're saying: The Afghan army and police force were equipped with arms, but Biden officials — including the president himself — say they lacked combat motivation.

- "Money can't buy will. You cannot purchase leadership," John Kirby, chief spokesman for Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, said Monday.
- "The principle of war stands — moral factors dominate material factors," Doug Lute, a retired Army lieutenant general who help direct Afghan war strategy during the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, told AP.
- "Morale, discipline, leadership, unit cohesion are more decisive than numbers of forces and equipment. As outsiders in Afghanistan, we can provide material, but only Afghans can provide the intangible moral factors," Lute said.

By the numbers: The U.S. spent approximately \$145 billion on trying to rebuild Afghanistan, per AP.

- About \$83 billion of the total went to developing and sustaining Afghanistan's army and police forces, according to AP.

Also on: [Yahoo News](#)

<https://www.nwaonline.com/news/2021/aug/17/with-surrender-us-weaponry-arming-taliban/?news-national>

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Biden's announcement set the final collapse in motion, said Stephen Biddle, a professor of international and public affairs at Columbia University and a former adviser to U.S. commanders in Afghanistan. "The problem of the U.S. withdrawal is that it sent a nationwide signal that the jig is up -- a sudden, nationwide signal that everyone read the same way," Biddle said.

Before April, the Afghan government troops were slowly but steadily losing the war, he said. When they learned that their American partners were going home, an impulse to give up without a fight "spread like wildfire."

The failures, however, go back much further and run much deeper. The United States tried to develop a credible Afghan defense establishment on the fly, even as it was fighting the Taliban, attempting to widen the political foundations of the government in Kabul and seeking to establish democracy in a country rife with corruption and cronyism.

The U.S.-supplied Afghan air force took to the skies for a final flight overnight Sunday to Monday -- not to attack the Taliban, as it had so many times before, but to save some of its planes and pilots from capture as the insurgents took control of the country.

A total of 46 airliners had departed by Monday morning, carrying asylum-seekers, many of whom were employees of the airport, Tolo News, an Afghan news agency, reported.

At least six military aircraft departed Afghanistan in a flight for safety to former Soviet states in the north. Five landed in Tajikistan, Tajik authorities said.

One plane was shot down in Uzbekistan, but its two pilots reportedly parachuted and survived. A spokesman for the Uzbek military confirmed it had shot down an airplane that traveled without permission into the country's airspace.

It did not specify the type of plane, but pictures of the wreckage suggested it was a Super Tucano, a turboprop light attack aircraft made by the Brazilian company Embraer and provided by the United States to Afghanistan, said Paul Hayes, director of Ascend, a U.K.-based aviation safety consultancy.

In Tajikistan, the Ministry of Emergency Situations said three Afghan military airplanes and two military helicopters carrying 143 soldiers and airmen were allowed to land after transmitting distress signals. The shoot-down in Uzbekistan and the Tajik authorities' emphasis on their neutrality in allowing landings reflected the hard response that Central Asian nations, worried about antagonizing the Taliban, have had to fleeing Afghan soldiers.

Retired General reacts to Taliban takeover in Afghanistan

August 16, 2021



[https://www.yahoo.com/now/retired-general-reacts-taliban-takeover-](https://www.yahoo.com/now/retired-general-reacts-taliban-takeover-073602758.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xILmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAHwvhUmvUj76-vs6XWHLyfj2x2Bzu4ajz9vJqNlr5JhhiiP_7bTXVPX6vWzPwNIq2nt65n4AmhLlzn1Ia3Artc3xbhhyIOJSN0TkZXsmrmZnX1jr_qvjbZwM2554-R-Dek0tw-FlsEdBYrKxcZbEtzqxeTLjB1hFKeh5ice_9)

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Retired Lt. Gen. Douglas Edward Lute, who served as ambassador to NATO and oversaw the war in Afghanistan for Bush and Obama, reacts to news of the Afghan government's collapse.

Also on: [ABC News](#), [Good Morning America](#)



Afghanistan under Taliban Control: Where do we go from here?

August 16, 2021

<https://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/video/afghanistan-taliban-control-79494636>

Taliban experts Gayle Tzemach Lemmon and retired Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute discuss why the country fell to the Taliban so quickly and President Biden's defense of the U.S. troop withdrawal.



445th Airlift Wing at WPAFB on standby for Afghanistan Response

By: WHIO Staff

August 16, 2021

<https://www.whio.com/news/local/445th-airlift-wing-wpafb-standby-afghanistan-response/7375E6VR4VH4TK744UGCUWYIDM/>

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AIR FORCE BASE — The U.S. Air Force 445th Airlift Wing based at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base is on standby for any potential response related to the evacuations underway in Afghanistan after the Taliban took over the country's capital city of Kabul over the weekend, according to a spokeswoman.

The spokeswoman said they have not received any specific details on any missions they may be involved with, however the 445th Airlift Wing last went to Afghanistan at the end of June to bring troops out.

The 445th Airlift Wing has made regular trips to Afghanistan using C-17 Globemaster III aircraft to deliver supplies, return wounded troops back to U.S. Wright-Patt has at least nine of the jets based here in the Dayton area.

Since October, they've had 14 missions to Afghanistan. That's about the average number per year, though there was not a set number each year, a spokeswoman said. The news comes as President Joe Biden will address the nation Monday afternoon about the crisis in Afghanistan.

The Afghanistan President fled the country Sunday bringing an end to 20 years of U.S. military support to transform the area.

The war has spanned four different U.S. Presidents and has taken the lives of more than 2,400 troops since 2001.

In Washington D.C., the government has poured more than \$2.2 trillion into the war over the last 20 years.

At this point, everyone has been evacuated from the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. State Department and Department of Defense said the next goal is to get Americans and Afghan allies and their families out of the country's capital safely.

This week, 6,000 U.S. troops are heading to the city in an effort to assist.

There's concern Taliban control of the country could lead to a few things - first, the deterioration of human rights for women and girls and second, the country could become a safe haven for terrorists like Al Qaeda.

Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute, who directed the Afghan strategy for Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama said this is what happens when a government collapses quickly.

"The Taliban as made progress, the government did not. We built security forces that in the end did not stand up, that could not withstand the pressure from the Taliban. I'm afraid we built a house that was built on sand," Lute told CBS News.

The UN Security Council is holding an emergency meeting to discuss the crisis in Afghanistan. In a statement, Rep. Mike Turner (R-Dayton) called the situation more of a "surrender," than a withdrawal.

"Now as Afghanistan is falling to the Taliban, we're not going to have a place from which to operate, either in counterterrorism against ISIS or Al Qaeda or in support of the Afghan national military. This is truly a travesty," Turner said. "This will be a humanitarian crisis and it will result in a refugee crisis."

A Moment for Soul Searching

By: Eliot A. Cohen

August 16, 2021

The Atlantic

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/08/afghanistan-provides-moment-soul-searching/619768/>

My Afghanistan war lasted almost exactly two years, from the beginning of 2007 to the end of the Bush administration in January 2009. As counselor of the State Department, my job was to take on whatever portfolio Secretary Condoleezza Rice wanted an extra set of senior eyes on. From the first—in fact, before I was formally sworn in—Afghanistan was on her mind. And so, even before entering government service, I canceled my classes for one of the very few times in my career and hopped on a plane to Afghanistan.

In the ensuing two years I visited the country often, usually as part of a small delegation led by Lieutenant General Douglas Lute, the deputy national security adviser, and accompanied by several other senior State and Defense officials. In between trips was the grind of interagency meetings (the so-called deputies committee) and bureaucratic follow-up at Foggy Bottom. Watching the fall of Kabul brought back a collage of memories from those visits and from the bureaucratic skirmishing at home.

- First trip: a visit to Nuristan, the Kafirstan of Rudyard Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King," a stark land of rushing streams and forested mountains, where I spoke with the governor, whose previous job had been running a pizzeria in northern Virginia. No signs of violence.
- A visit to Peshawar, in Pakistan's then-named Northwest Frontier Province. A superb consul general praised a brilliant young diplomat who was fluent in Pashto but was being compelled to rotate out, against his will. Back home, I was curious about how many Pashto speakers the State Department had at its disposal. Answer: nine, most of them native speakers in some nondiplomatic role like information technology. How many in training? Two. Worst moment: describing this to a senior colleague who said, "That doesn't sound too bad. Not much need for Pashto speakers anywhere else."
- Bamyan, home of the great Buddhas blown up by the Taliban in a typically barbaric act of destruction. A beautiful and fairly peaceful province (you can tell by the level of security you need to move around, and by the way your escorts carry themselves—the Kiwis watching us were pretty chill), inhabited chiefly by Hazara Shia and persecuted by the Taliban. The governor was the only woman in that role in Afghanistan: a tremendously impressive person, a doctor. Her fate is surely sealed. The ruined city of Shahr-e Gholghola in the distance, silhouetted against the mountains. "The City of Screams."
- Generals, diplomats, and intelligence officials briefing the president and the secretary of state reported that 75 percent of the violence in Afghanistan occurs in only 10 percent of the districts, implying that the violence was contained. At the advice of David Kilcullen, a top counterinsurgency expert, I probed a bit. *Do we really know what goes on in every district?* No. *What counts as an incident of violence?* Firefights involving our troops, whether we start them or not. *But isn't violence directed by Afghans against Afghans more important?* Possibly, but it's too hard to measure. *Is violence the right metric anyway, given that a bit of judicious terror is what keeps the locals in line?* Probably, but at least the number of firefights and IEDs discovered is something we can count.
- Meetings in Kabul. One of the few Afghans (or Americans) whose assessment of the situation I had come to trust was sad-eyed, hard-headed, unyielding Amrullah Saleh, the head of the intelligence

services and later the first vice president of Afghanistan. There are reports that he is in Tajikistan and will lead a resistance movement from there.

- Peshawar, Rawalpindi, Islamabad. The cold-eyed Pakistani generals, who you knew—I mean, if you had the right sources, you really knew—were lying to you, and assisting, if not directing, the guerrillas trying to kill Americans.
- Another briefing to the president and secretary of state, at which I learned that our own eminent soldiers and diplomats were prone not so much to lie as to convey primarily information that they knew would bring a smile to the boss's face: tales of successful ambushes and enemy body counts—and yet somehow we needed two more brigades. Smashing successes that were tactically brilliant and strategically meaningless.
- Walking through an Afghan suburb with Doug Lute, when his bodyguard, a wiry little long-haired southerner, stiffened like a bird dog and hissed “Wait.” Five minutes later, we moved on. He had noticed an Afghan soldier with the safety off his weapon: probably nothing more than slack discipline, but a warning that in this country, your own side sometimes shoots you.
- A visit to a military-training team consisting of half a dozen overweight National Guard members who knew nothing about Afghanistan, did not accompany Afghan soldiers on combat missions, and who themselves were patronized by the hardened paratrooper accompanying us. They meant well, but I would not have wanted them training me or my son.
- A shouting match with a senior State Department official in Washington. He was responsible for poppy eradication and insisted that counter-narcotics was what America's Afghan policy was all about, not counterinsurgency. He was more than a little unstable. But he was politically well connected.
- Flying in a helicopter with the local U.S. Army brigade commander, asking, *What does it mean when you say, 'Clearing the valley'?* Well, sir, we go in and fight with the Taliban until they stop fighting. *Are you acting on the basis of intelligence, going after particular people?* No, we just patrol and then react as the situation develops. *So, you're basically walking around looking for fights, and this being Afghanistan, you get them?* Pretty much.
- A district governor plaintively telling us that once again American Special Forces had, without warning, swooped in in the middle of the night, snatched the son of one of his villagers, and vanished. The family demanded to know why, what he was being held for, where he was being held, and when he could return. The governor had no answers. So the special operators had another scalp, as it were, dangling from their belts, but they had undermined the local leaders upon whom success depended.
- Visiting a divisional headquarters. In Afghanistan, as in Iraq, the pattern was the same: These command elements rotate in their entirety every year, so that as a result, we fight the same war not for 20 years, but for one year 20 times. On the first visit, “This is tough—much tougher than anything we expected.” Six months later, “A lot of work to do but we've got a grip on it: Things are definitely improving.” And six months later, as they were packing up to leave, “We have achieved irreversible momentum.” And then, when a new general and his team arrived on the scene, the cycle began again.
- *Madam Secretary, please look at these maps. They are made by the United Nations for the local NGOs: Green shows where they can move around pretty safely, yellow where there is danger, red*

where it is easy to get killed. Let's flip through them year by year. You can see, the green is shrinking, and the yellow and red are growing.

- Meeting with village elders, who were extremely well informed about the upcoming American presidential election. We tend to forget that they know a lot more about us than we usually do about them.

These are all snapshots, no more. They may not have been representative of Afghan realities everywhere at the time, or before, or after, but they are what I saw, which is why I became an Afghan pessimist. Which is not the same thing as considering the project doomed from the start. I fully recognize that my memories are now more than a decade old, but nothing I have learned since then makes me think that these phenomena, or others like them, vanished.

The Afghan War consisted of many choices, many decisions, many policies, many actions. It is entirely too easy to declare the whole thing doomed from the beginning. It is even easier and more pernicious to let ourselves off the hook by denouncing the failures of other tribes, so to speak: Obama people blaming the Bush people, Trump people blaming the Obama team, and Biden people blaming everyone; soldiers saying it's the fault of the civilians; civilians insisting the soldiers screwed up; Americans disparaging Afghans.

The collapse of this past week came not despite our efforts of the past 20 years—it came, in part, because of them. Once the Afghans knew that we really—no kidding—were going, they cut their deals, because that was what experience had taught them to do. And let us not forget, the United States was not just pulling out a couple thousand American troops—it was also, in effect, ordering the withdrawal of many thousands more of our European and other allies, and the thousands of contractors who kept the Afghan military running. There may have been some cowardice in Afghan behavior in opening the gates of their cities to the Taliban, but there was a lot more prudence.

Now there will be plenty of room for meticulous soul-searching, for careful scrutiny of institutional and personal failures—without recrimination, one hopes, but also without excuses. We owe that much, at least, to the district official I met, to the Hazara governor, to Amrullah Saleh, and above all, to the students I saw attending a girls' school and to the women working in a craft shop. I can't bear writing about them today.



Former NATO Ambassador Perfectly Explains Why Afghanistan's Collapse Is Not Biden's Fault

August 15, 2021

By: Jason Easley

<https://www.politicususa.com/2021/08/15/former-nato-ambassador-perfectly-explains-why-afghanistans-collapse-is-not-bidens-fault.html>

Former Amb. Douglas Lute explained that the United States could give the Afghanistan military everything except the will to fight.

Amb. Douglas Lute explains that the US could give the Afghanistan military everything, except the will to fight. Lute said, "I think it is that moral part of the equation that we have seen break down very rapidly in the last several days."

Ambassador Lute said on MSNBC, “Outside force like ours over the last 20 years in Afghanistan can deliver hardware. We can deliver tangible goods. We can train them. We can field the forces. We can provide salaries, provide supplies, and so forth. We can do the physical part. But moral part, leadership, discipline, legitimacy have to be organically authentically Afghan. I think it is that moral part of the equation that we have seen break down very rapidly in the last several days. This is something that America from outside cannot provide Afghanistan.”

Republican Critics Of Biden’s Decision Ignore That The Afghan Military Did Not Want To Fight.

The Afghan government’s collapse had nothing to do with the Biden administration’s effort. The government in Afghanistan collapsed because the US-trained and supported military did not want to fight. The other option if the Afghan military won’t fight is for the US to do the fighting for them, which is what people like Rep. Liz Cheney have been suggesting, but why put American sons and daughters in harm’s way for a nation that does not want to fight for its own democracy?

Over and over again, President Biden is being proven right about Afghanistan.

The Afghan military did not want to fight the Taliban, and Biden wasn’t going to sacrifice more US troops to do the fighting for them.

Also on: [onde quando](#), [Washington Dailies](#), [NewsDome](#), [News Microsoft](#), [Bergamo Web News](#)



US “made a mistake” in underestimating Afghan forces: Lute

Fox News
August 15, 2021

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/us-made-a-mistake-in-underestimating-afghan-forces-lute/vi-AANlyru>

Former Department of National Security Adviser of Afghan War Douglas Lute looks back on history of Afghanistan tensions and military capability.



New York Times: Taliban Sweep in Afghanistan Follows Years of U.S. Miscalculations

By: David E. Sanger and Helene Cooper
August 14, 2021

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/14/us/politics/afghanistan-biden.html>

President Biden’s top advisers concede they were stunned by the rapid collapse of the Afghan army in the face of an aggressive, well-planned offensive by the [Taliban](#) that now threatens [Kabul](#), [Afghanistan’s](#) capital.

The past 20 years show they should not have been.

If there is a consistent theme over two decades of war in [Afghanistan](#), it is the overestimation of the results of the \$83 billion the United States has spent since 2001 [training and equipping the Afghan security forces](#) and an underestimation of the brutal, wily strategy of the [Taliban](#). The Pentagon had issued dire warnings to Mr. Biden even before he took office about the potential for the [Taliban](#) to overrun the Afghan army, but intelligence estimates, now shown to have badly missed the mark, assessed it might happen in 18 months, not weeks.

Commanders did know that the afflictions of the Afghan forces had never been cured: the deep corruption, the failure by the government to pay many Afghan soldiers and police officers for months, the defections, the soldiers sent to the front without adequate food and water, let alone arms. In the past several days, the Afghan forces have steadily collapsed as they battled to defend ever shrinking territory, [losing Mazar-i-Sharif, the country's economic engine, to the Taliban](#) on Saturday.

Mr. Biden's aides say that the persistence of those problems [reinforced his belief](#) that the United States could not prop up the Afghan government and military in perpetuity. In Oval Office meetings this spring, he told aides that staying another year, or even five, would not make a substantial difference and was not worth the risks.

In the end, an Afghan force that did not believe in itself and a [U.S. effort](#) that Mr. Biden, and most Americans, no longer believed would alter the course of events combined to bring an ignoble close to America's longest war. The United States kept forces in [Afghanistan](#) far longer than the British did in the 19th century, and twice as long as the Soviets — with roughly the same results.

For Mr. Biden, the last of four American presidents to face painful choices in Afghanistan but [the first to get out](#), the debate about a final withdrawal and the miscalculations over how to execute it began the moment he took office.

“Under Trump, we were one tweet away from complete, precipitous withdrawal,” said Douglas E. Lute, a retired general who directed Afghan strategy at the National Security Council for Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. “Under Biden, it was clear to everyone who knew him, who saw him pressing for a vastly reduced force more than a decade ago, that he was determined to end U.S. military involvement,” he added, “but the Pentagon believed its own narrative that we would stay forever.”

“The puzzle for me is the absence of contingency planning: If everyone knew we were headed for the exits, why did we not have a plan over the past two years for making this work?”

A Skeptical President

From the moment that news outlets called Pennsylvania for Mr. Biden on Nov. 7, making him [the next commander in chief](#) for 1.4 million active-duty troops, Pentagon officials knew they would face an uphill battle to stop a withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan. Defense Department leaders had already been fending off Mr. Biden's predecessor, Donald J. Trump, who wanted a rapid drawdown. In one Twitter post last year, he declared all American troops [would be out by that Christmas](#).

And while they had publicly voiced support for the agreement Mr. Trump [reached with the Taliban](#) in February 2020 for a complete withdrawal this May, Pentagon officials said they wanted to talk Mr. Biden out of it.

After Mr. Biden took office, top Defense Department officials began a lobbying campaign to keep a small counterterrorism force in Afghanistan for a few more years. They told the president that the Taliban had grown stronger under Mr. Trump than at any point in the past two decades and pointed to intelligence estimates predicting that in two or three years, Al Qaeda could find a new foothold in Afghanistan.

Shortly after Lloyd J. Austin III [was sworn in as defense secretary](#) on Jan. 22, he and Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recommended to Mr. Biden that 3,000 to 4,500 troops stay in Afghanistan, nearly double the 2,500 troops there. On Feb. 3, a congressionally appointed panel led by a retired four-star Marine general, Joseph F. Dunford Jr., [publicly recommended](#) that Mr. Biden abandon the exit deadline of May 1 and further reduce American forces only as security conditions improved.

A report by the panel assessed that [withdrawing troops](#) on a strict timeline rather than how well the Taliban adhered to the agreement heightened the risk of a potential civil war once international forces left.

But Mr. Biden, who had become deeply skeptical of American efforts to remake foreign countries in his years on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and as vice president, asked what a few thousand American troops could do if Kabul was attacked. Aides said he told them that the presence of the American troops would further the Afghan government's reliance on the United States and delay the day it would take responsibility for its own defense.

The president told his national security team, including Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and his national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, that he was convinced that no matter what the United States did, Afghanistan was almost certainly headed into another civil war — one Washington could not prevent, but also, in his view, one it could not be drawn into.

By March, Pentagon officials said they realized they were not getting anywhere with Mr. Biden. Although he listened to their arguments and asked extensive questions, they said they had a sense that his mind was made up.

In late March, Mr. Austin and General Milley made a last-ditch effort with the president by forecasting dire outcomes in which the Afghan military folded in an aggressive advance by the Taliban. They drew comparisons to how the Iraqi military was overrun by the Islamic State in 2014 after American combat troops left Iraq, prompting Mr. Obama to send American forces back.

“We’ve seen this movie before,” Mr. Austin told Mr. Biden, according to officials with knowledge of the meetings.

But the president was unmoved. If the Afghan government could not hold off the Taliban now, aides said he asked, when would they be able to? None of the Pentagon officials could answer the question.

On the morning of April 6, Mr. Biden told Mr. Austin and General Milley he wanted all American troops out by Sept. 11.

The intelligence assessments in Mr. Biden's briefing books gave him some assurance that if a bloody debacle resulted in Afghanistan, it would at least be delayed. As recently as late June, the intelligence agencies estimated that even if the Taliban continued to gain power, it would be at least a year and a half before Kabul would be threatened; the Afghan forces had the advantages of greater numbers and air power, if they could keep their helicopters and planes flying.

Even so, the Pentagon moved swiftly to get its troops out, fearful of the risks of leaving a dwindling number of Americans in Afghanistan and of service members dying in a war the United States had given up for lost. Before the July 4 weekend, the United States [had handed over Bagram Air Base](#), the military hub of the war, to the Afghans, effectively ending all major U.S. military operations in the country.

“Afghans are going to have to be able to do it themselves with the air force they have, which we’re helping them maintain,” Mr. Biden said at the time. A week later, he argued that the Afghans “have the capacity” to defend themselves.

“The question is,” he said, “will they do it?”

The Will Is Gone

To critics of the decision, the president underestimated the importance of even a modest presence, and the execution of the withdrawal made the problem far worse.

“We set them up for failure,” said David H. Petraeus, the retired general who [commanded the international forces in Afghanistan](#) from 2010 until he was appointed C.I.A. director the next year. Mr. Biden’s team, he argued, “did not recognize the risk incurred by the swift withdrawal” of intelligence and reconnaissance drones and close air support, as well as the withdrawal of thousands of contractors who kept the Afghan air force flying — all in the middle of a particularly intense fighting season.

The result was that Afghan forces on the ground would “fight for a few days, and then realize there are no reinforcements” on the way, he said. The “psychological impact was devastating.”

But administration officials, responding to such critiques, counter that the Afghan military dwarfs the Taliban, some 300,000 troops to 75,000.

“They have an air force, a capable air force,” something the Taliban does not have, John F. Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary, said on Friday. “They have modern equipment. They have the benefit of the training that we have provided for the last 20 years. It’s time now to use those advantages.”

But by the time Mr. Kirby noted those advantages, none of them seemed to be making a difference. Feeling abandoned by the United States and commanded by rudderless leaders meant that Afghan troops on the ground “looked at what was in front of them, and what was behind them, and decided it’s easier to go off on their own,” said retired Gen. Joseph L. Votel, the former commander of United States Central Command who oversaw the war in Afghanistan from 2016 to 2019.

Mr. Biden, one administration official said, expressed frustration that [President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan](#) had not managed to effectively plan and execute what was supposed to be the latest strategy: consolidating forces [to protect key cities](#). On Wednesday, Mr. Ghani fired his army chief, Lt. General Wali Mohammad Ahmadzai, who had only been in place for two months, replacing him with Maj. Gen. Haibatullah Alizai, a special operations commander. The commandos under General Alizai are the only troops who have consistently fought the Taliban these past weeks.

Richard Fontaine, the chief executive of the Center for a New American Security, an influential Washington think tank that specializes in national security, wrote that in the end, the 20-year symbiosis between the United States and the Afghan government it stood up, supported and ushered through elections had broken down.

“Those highlighting the Afghan government’s military superiority — in numbers, training, equipment, air power — miss the larger point,” he wrote recently. “Everything depends on the will to fight for the government. And that, it turns out, depended on U.S. presence and support. We’re exhorting the Afghans to show political will when theirs depends on ours. And ours is gone.”

On Saturday, as the last major city in northern Afghanistan fell to the Taliban, Mr. Biden accelerated the deployment of 1,000 additional troops to the country to help ensure the safe evacuation of U.S. citizens and Afghans who worked for the U.S. government from Kabul.

Mr. Biden released a lengthy statement in which he blamed Mr. Trump for at least part of the unfolding disaster. He said, “I inherited a deal cut by my predecessor” which “left the Taliban in the strongest position militarily since 2001 and imposed a May 1, 2021, deadline on U.S. forces.”

He said when he took office, he had a choice: abide by the deal or “ramp up our presence and send more American troops to fight once again in another country’s civil conflict.”

“I was the fourth president to preside over an American troop presence in Afghanistan — two Republicans, two Democrats,” Mr. Biden said. “I would not, and will not, pass this war onto a fifth.”

Also posted on [BGR Group’s Website](#) and [The Irish Times](#)



Longest War: Were America’s Decades in Afghanistan Worth It?

By: Ellen Knickmeyer

August 14, 2021

<https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-middle-east-afghanistan-8d6d6d9e1e7cddb49caf0b52a40c2e8>

Here’s what 19-year-old Lance Cpl. William Bee felt flying into southern Afghanistan on Christmas Day 2001: purely lucky. The U.S. was hitting back at the al-Qaida plotters who had brought down the World Trade Center, and Bee found himself among the first Marines on the ground.

“Excitement,” Bee says these days, of the teenage Bee’s thoughts then. “To be the dudes that got to open it up first.”

In the decade that followed, three more deployments in America’s longest war scoured away that lucky feeling.

For Bee, it came down to a night in 2008 in Afghanistan’s Helmand province. By then a sergeant, Bee held the hand of an American sniper who had just been shot in the head, as a medic sliced open the man’s throat for an airway.

“After that it was like, you know what — ‘F—k these people,’” Bee recounted, of what drove him by his fourth and final Afghan deployment. “I just want to bring my guys back. That’s all I care about. I want to bring them home.”

As President Joe Biden ends the U.S. combat role in Afghanistan this month, Americans and Afghans are questioning whether the war was worth the cost: more than 3,000 American and other NATO lives lost, tens of thousands of Afghans dead, trillions of dollars of U.S. debt that generations of Americans will pay for, and an Afghanistan that in a stunning week of fighting appears at imminent threat of falling back under Taliban rule, just as Americans found it nearly 20 years ago.

For Biden, for Bee and for some of the American principals in the U.S. and NATO war in Afghanistan, the answer to whether it was worth the cost often comes down to parsing.

There were the first years of the war, when Americans broke up Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida in Afghanistan and routed the Taliban government that had hosted the terrorist network. That succeeded.

The proof is clear, says Douglas Lute, White House czar for the war during the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, and a retired lieutenant general: Al-Qaida hasn't been able to mount a major attack on the West since 2005.

"We have decimated al-Qaida in that region, in Afghanistan and Pakistan," Lute says.

But after that came the grinding second phase of the war. U.S. fears of a Taliban rebound whenever Americans eventually pulled out meant that service members such as Bee kept getting sent back in, racking up more close calls, injuries and dead comrades.

Lute and some others argue that what the second half of the war bought was time — a grace period for Afghanistan's government, security forces and civil society to try to build enough strength to survive on their own.

Quality of life in some ways did improve, modernizing under the Western occupation, even as the millions of dollars the U.S. poured into Afghanistan fed corruption. Infant mortality rates fell by half. In 2005, fewer than 1 in 4 Afghans had access to electricity. By 2019, nearly all did.

The second half of the war allowed Afghan women, in particular, opportunities entirely denied them under the fundamentalist Taliban, so that more than 1 in 3 teenage girls — their whole lives spent under the protection of Western forces — today can read and write.

But it's that longest, second phase of the war that looks on the verge of complete failure now.

The U.S. war left the Taliban undefeated and failed to secure a political settlement. Taliban forces this past week have swept across two-thirds of the country and captured provincial capitals, on the path of victory before U.S. combat forces even complete their pullout. On many fronts, the Taliban are rolling over Afghan security forces that U.S. and NATO forces spent two decades working to build.

This swift advance sets up a last stand in Kabul, where most Afghans live. It threatens to clamp the country under the Taliban's strict interpretation of religious law, erasing much of the gains.

"There's no 'mission accomplished,'" Biden snapped last month, batting down a question from a reporter. Biden quickly corrected himself, evoking the victories of the first few years of the war. "The mission was accomplished in that we ... got Osama bin Laden, and terrorism is not emanating from that part of the world," he added.

Richard Boucher, assistant secretary of state for Central Asia during much of the war's first decade, says the criticism was largely not of the conflict itself but because it went on so long.

"It was the expansion of war aims, to try to create a government that was capable of stopping any future attacks," Boucher said.

America expended the most lives, and dollars, on the most inconclusive years of the war.

The strain of fighting two post-9/11 wars at once with an all-volunteer military meant that more than half of the 2.8 million American servicemen and women who deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq served two or more times, according to the Costs of War project at Brown University.

The repeated deployments contributed to disability rates in those veterans that are more than double that of Vietnam veterans, says Linda Bilmes, a senior lecturer in public policy at Harvard University.

Bilmes calculates the U.S. will spend more than \$2 trillion just caring for and supporting Afghanistan and Iraq veterans as they age, with costs peaking 30 years to 40 years from now.

That's on top of \$1 trillion in Pentagon and State Department costs in Afghanistan since 2001. Because the U.S. borrowed rather than raised taxes to pay for the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, interest payments are estimated to cost succeeding generations of Americans trillions of dollars more still.

Annual combat deaths peaked around the time of the war's midpoint, as Obama tried a final surge of forces to defeat the Taliban. In all, 2,448 American troops, 1,144 service members from NATO and other allied countries, more than 47,000 Afghan civilians and at least 66,000 Afghan military and police died, according to the Pentagon and to the Costs of War project.

All the while, a succession of U.S. commanders tried new strategies, acronyms and slogans in fighting a Taliban insurgency.

Kandahar's airstrip, where Bee was quickly put to work digging a foxhole for himself over Christmas 2001, grew into a post for tens of thousands of NATO troops, complete with Popeyes and Burger Kings and a hockey rink.

Over the years, fighting forces such as Bee's 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit moved into hot spots to fight the Taliban and build ties with local leaders, often only to see gains lost when their unit rotated out again. In Helmand province, which proved the turning point for Bee in 2008, hundreds of U.S. and other NATO forces died fighting that way. Taliban fighters recaptured the province on Friday.

Bee's Afghanistan tours finally ended in 2010, when an improvised explosive device exploded 4 feet from him, killing two fellow service members who had been standing with him. It was Bee's third head injury, and for a time left him unable to walk a block without falling down.

Was it worth it?

"The people whose lives we affected, I personally think we did them better, that they're better off for it," answered Bee, who now works for a company that provides autonomous robots for Marine training at North Carolina's Camp Lejeune and is co-writing a book about his time in Afghanistan.

"But I also wouldn't trade a handful of Afghan villages for one Marine," he added.

Ask the same question in Afghanistan, though, and you get different answers.

Some Afghans — asked that question before the Taliban’s stunning sweep last week — respond that it’s more than time for Americans to let Afghans handle their own affairs.

But one 21-year-old woman, Shogufa, says American troops’ two decades on the ground meant all the difference for her.

The Associated Press is using her first name only, given fears of Taliban retribution against women who violate their strict codes.

When still in her infancy, she was pledged to marry a much older cousin in the countryside to pay off a loan. She grew up in a family, and society, where few women could read or write.

But as she grew up, Shogufa came across a Western nonprofit that had come to Kabul to promote health and leadership for Afghan girls. It was one of a host of such development groups that came to Afghanistan during the U.S.-led war.

Shogufa thrived. She deflected her family’s moves to marry her off to her cousin. She got a job and is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in business administration.

For Shogufa today, the gratitude for what she’s gained is shadowed by her fears of all that she stands to lose.

Her message to Americans, as they left and the Taliban closed in on Kabul? “Thank you for everything you have done in Afghanistan,” she said, in good but imperfect English. “The other thing was to request that they stay with us.”

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The Guardian

US deserves big share of blame for Afghanistan Military Disaster

By: Julian Borger

August 12, 2021

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/12/afghanistan-us-military-analysis-biden-rumsfeld>

As one provincial capital after another has fallen to the Taliban, the message from Washington to the Afghans facing the onslaught has been that their survival is in their own hands.

“They’ve got to fight for themselves, fight for their nation,” Joe Biden said. Jen Psaki, the White House spokeswoman, added: “They have what they need. What they need to determine is whether they have the political will to fight back.”

But despite more than \$80bn in US security assistance since 2002 and an annual military budget far in excess of other developing nations, Afghan military resistance to the Taliban is collapsing with greater speed than even most pessimists had predicted. There is talk among US officials of Kabul falling in months – if not weeks.

Interviews with former officials who have been intimately involved in US policy in Afghanistan point to an interconnected web of factors behind the implosion, some of them long in the making, some a result of decisions taken in the past few months.

While there is consensus that a failure of leadership and unity in Kabul has played an important part in the domino-fall of defeats, there is also agreement that the attempt to put all the blame on the Afghans obscures the share of responsibility of the US and its allies for the military disaster.

The candid assessments of US and allied officials and soldiers recorded in congressionally mandated “lessons learned” reports obtained by the Washington Post make clear some of the problems so evident today had their origins at the onset of the US-led military presence in the country.

In the early years, when the Taliban were on the run, the Pentagon, under the defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, was loth to fund a substantial Afghan force, particularly after the Iraq invasion drew away resources and attention.

Later, when the Taliban had regrouped and struck back, the coalition raced to build the Afghan national security forces (ANSF) comprising army, police and militias on a huge scale, totalling over 350,000 at their peak, cutting corners on training and funding.

Out in the provinces, newly minted police were left to fend for themselves, and many used their authority and guns to squeeze income out of the population. Army officers drew salaries for tens of thousands “ghost soldiers”, whose names were on the books, but who never materialised.

“We economised. We got the ANSF we deserve,” Douglas Lute, a three-star army general who served as the Afghan war tsar in the Bush and Obama administrations, said in his “lessons learned” interview. “If we started with the ANSF in 2002-6 when the Taliban were weak and disorganised, things may have been different. Instead we went to Iraq.”

Throughout the 20 years of the US war in Afghanistan, it is clear that the ANSF’s capabilities were consistently oversold by a succession of US defence secretaries and military commanders, who enthused over progress made.

Retired Gen Joseph Votel, who led US central command from 2016 to 2019, admitted that in some cases the charge of overselling the ANSF was “fair criticism”. But he added that many individual Afghan units, particularly special forces, were impressive. The main problem, he argued, was unevenness in the quality of the troops and the lack of integration on a strategic, national scale.

“The challenge of leadership at scale has always been a significant one for them – to not just have good tactical commanders, but also to have good leaders at all levels,” Votel told the Guardian.

“National government has always had a challenge with exercising authority, particularly in far-flung provinces of the country.”

Vali Nasr, a former US adviser and now a professor of international affairs and Middle East studies at Johns Hopkins University, puts a share of the blame more specifically on the shoulders of the current Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani.

“He has clearly failed from day one to create a political consensus in Kabul in order to create a much stronger source of resistance to the Taliban,” said Nasr, who served as special adviser to the US

Afghanistan envoy, Richard Holbrooke, from 2009 to 2011. “A big part of the problem is the fact that there is no kind of leadership that would give local warlords reasons for why they should resist the Taliban. So the more they see the Taliban victory is inevitable, the more the victory becomes inevitable, because they just cut their own deals with them.”

Given all these structural weaknesses in the security apparatus the US and its allies helped build, many military analysts argue the abruptness of the US withdrawal, begun by Donald Trump and continued by Joe Biden, has contributed to the speed of the collapse.

“The core of the problem is the way President Biden made and announced this decision and its timing,” said Frederick Kagan, a military historian who served as an adviser to US commanders in Afghanistan. “The president announced the order to withdraw right at the start of fighting season. That was unnecessary,” Kagan, now a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, argued. “The president could perfectly well have ordered withdrawal to occur after the completion of the major fighting this year, and allowed the Afghans to continue to have the support that they had expected and prepare themselves for a world without US support.”

Without US soldiers on the ground directing precision airstrikes in the midst of the battle, US air support to Afghan troops is of limited help and is due to cease altogether at the end of the month. Afghanistan has its own air force but it is dependent on US military contractors to service it, and the contractors were among the first to leave. Bringing them back after the US withdrawal would require a new agreement that could take months to negotiate.

“Very few of America’s allies, even including Nato allies, actually have the capacity to provide their own advanced air power, air cover, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets,” Kagan said. In view of the sudden US and allied departure at the very start of a mass Taliban offensive, he argued it was deeply unfair to demonise the Afghan forces for the military rout they are enduring.

“They have taken horrific casualties over the course of this war. Their families have been targeted, and yet they’ve continued to volunteer,” he said. “It is in fact offensive not to recognise the determination that hundreds of thousands of Afghans have shown up to fight against our common enemies and their willingness to die and run risks to their families to do so. It is part of a story that is not being told.”



**PBS NewsHour: Will the Withdrawal of US Troops Enable the Taliban?
Three Afghanistan Experts Weigh In**

Reporting by: Judy Woodruff
April 14, 2021

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/will-the-withdrawal-of-u-s-troops-enable-the-taliban-three-afghanistan-experts-weigh-in>

Judy Woodruff speaks with three experts on Afghanistan. Retired Lt. Gen. Doug Lute served in both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations focusing on Afghanistan. Annie Pforzheimer was acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Afghanistan until 2019. And David Sedney was Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia during the Obama administration.

Judy Woodruff:

We return to the president's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan by September 2021.

And for that, we get three views.

Retired Lieutenant General Doug Lute served in both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations focusing on Afghanistan. He also served as U.S. ambassador to NATO during the Obama administration. Annie Pforzheimer had a 30-year career in the Foreign Service. She was the deputy chief of mission in Afghanistan from 2017 to 2018, and was acting deputy assistant secretary of state for Afghanistan until 2019.

And David Sedney was deputy assistant secretary of defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia during the Obama administration. Until recently, he was the president of American University of Afghanistan.

And we welcome all three of you to the "NewsHour."

David Sedney, I am going to start with you.

Today, we heard President Biden say that the threat against the U.S. over the last 20 years has spread around the world, in his words, it's metastasized, and it just doesn't make sense to keep troops in one country, Afghanistan, at a cost of billions of dollars.

What is your response to that?

David Sedney:

I think he is dead wrong.

The threat from al-Qaida and from ISIS in Afghanistan has not gone away. The pledges by the Taliban to combat that have been shown by the United — by a recent United Nations report to have been lies.

So, trusting the Taliban, which is what this administration is doing, with the future of American security and counterterrorism is a very bad idea.

Judy Woodruff:

Ambassador Doug Lute, is it the case, as we're hearing David Sedney say, that there's still very much a live threat there from the Taliban and that pulling out is the wrong thing to do?

Douglas Lute:

Well, Judy, I don't think anybody claims that al-Qaida is dead, but al-Qaida in that region, Afghanistan and Pakistan, is decimated compared to what it was 10 or 20 years ago.

And, actually, al-Qaida franchises elsewhere. So, Somalia, Yemen, Syria, parts of Africa, are much more severe threats and much more imminent threats to the United States' homeland than the branches in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Judy Woodruff:

So — and, on that point, let me turn to you, Annie Pforzheimer.

This argument that the threat that was so present and so enormous inside Afghanistan has spread around the world, in other words, that the Taliban is weaker than it was, what is your sense of that?

Annie Pforzheimer:

Unfortunately, the Taliban will be emboldened by what has just happened.

A conditionless withdrawal with a date is removing the leverage that we have had. And at this point, I don't believe that they have any reason to sit down to negotiations with the Afghan government, nor to fulfill any of the promises that they have made regarding fighting terrorism.

Judy Woodruff:

And why do you believe that?

Annie Pforzheimer:

I believe that they can simply look at the calendar and also use the psychology of appearing to have kicked us out of the country, the way that the Soviets left, to portray themselves as winners.

And Afghans, unfortunately, will have to make their decisions based on the idea that the Taliban could come back to power.

Judy Woodruff:

Coming back to you, Ambassador Doug Lute, what about that, this notion, the administration argument that the United States can manage whatever Taliban threat there is from the outside, that we don't need to have boots on the ground?

Douglas Lute:

Judy, I think it's really important here to be crystal clear about who the enemy is.

Nobody likes the Taliban, but the Taliban have never threatened or harmed an American outside of Afghanistan. Their goal is to have a voice in the governance of Afghanistan itself. These are Afghan citizens fighting for Afghanistan in their own way.

There's — that does not suggest that they are not repressive, Islamists, and so forth, but they don't threaten America directly. They're distinctly different from al-Qaida.

Now, the two have linkages, and it's those linkages between Taliban and al-Qaida which have been promised to be broken by the U.S.-Taliban agreement, and which now have to be verified and confirmed and overwatched. But the two are very different.

Judy Woodruff:

David Sedney, what about that?

David Sedney:

That's, unfortunately, not at all accurate.

The Taliban were the host to al-Qaida. The Taliban supported al-Qaida. And even though, in the agreement that Ambassador Khalilzad signed for the United States over a year ago, the Taliban promised, according to former Secretary of State Pompeo, to break ties with al-Qaida. They have not done.

The United States has never had a good handle on what al-Qaida's presence are in the U.S. A few years ago, a number of people in the Obama administration, including General Lute, said the same thing, that al-Qaida has been decimated.

But two years later, the U.S. found a large al-Qaida training camp outside of Kandahar that took us completely by surprise. So, any claim the Taliban doesn't have ties with al-Qaida, is not sympathetic to al-

Qaida, is not allied to al-Qaida is just plain wrong, and any belief that the al-Qaida is decimated, as General Lute has said, is, unfortunately, not reliable.

Judy Woodruff:

Ambassador Lute?

Douglas Lute:

Judy — yes, Judy, if I may, what I said was that al-Qaida in this region, Afghanistan and Pakistan, are decimated compared to what they were previously.

I just go back to David. I mean, what's the evidence of an al-Qaida transnational terrorist threat? The last one, by my record, by my survey of that history is 2005 in London. So, the presence of a few al-Qaida fighters doesn't constitute a threat to the American homeland.

Judy Woodruff:

Let me come back to you, because I do want to bring you back into the conversation, Annie Pforzheimer, and that is about what's going to happen to women inside Afghanistan.

I know you were part of a conversation today with a number of women — Afghan women leaders. Tell us about that. How are they reacting? What are their concerns?

Annie Pforzheimer:

Thank you.

They are reacting with horror and grave concern. And if I may actually link the two for a moment, al-Qaida and ISIS are present in Afghanistan. If there is a civil war, which is the deepest fear of the women that we speak to, in addition to the Taliban taking power, the threat of militias that are arming themselves, people who will defend against the Taliban, could result in a civil war, which provides a power vacuum that ISIS will be more than happy to take advantage of.

And I think the women are right to be concerned about this.

Judy Woodruff:

Ambassador Lute, how do you respond?

Douglas Lute:

My response is that Afghanistan's already suffering from civil war, and the women and children of Afghanistan are among the most suffering.

Over the last several years, each year has featured 10,000 Afghan civilian casualties to the war that's ongoing today with our troops present.

And on the top of that 10,000, another 10,000 Afghan security forces have been casualties to the civil war that's going on today. The best outlook for ending that civil war is not with 2,500 additional troops or sustaining 2,500 troops in Afghanistan, but by way of negotiating the end of the civil war between the two primary Afghan parties, the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government.

Judy Woodruff:

Annie Pforzheimer, what would the women you're speaking to say to that?

Annie Pforzheimer:

I think they will say this has not been a civil war.

This has been a series of attacks on civilians by Taliban, by the Haqqani Network and by ISIS. A civil war would indicate that the people are taking up arms against other people. That's not the case.

And, yes, it hasn't stopped because there have been international forces, but the idea is to push the Taliban to a real peace negotiation, not to give up our leverage.

Judy Woodruff:

Doug Lute?

Douglas Lute:

OK. So, first of all, I think Annie and David and I would agree that the war that is happening in Afghanistan today is basically Afghans, Afghan Taliban vs. the Afghan government.

By fundamental definition, that is civil war, Afghans fighting Afghans.

(CROSSTALK)

Annie Pforzheimer:

It's not a government.

Douglas Lute:

I'm sorry.

David Sedney:

It's not a civil war.

(CROSSTALK)

Douglas Lute:

Can we settle on — without that term, can we settle on Afghans fighting Afghans?

David Sedney:

No, it's...

(CROSSTALK)

Annie Pforzheimer:

Well, a government enforcing its laws...

(CROSSTALK)

Douglas Lute:

Right. I'm sorry.

David Sedney:

And there's been a lot of problems here, Doug.

For example, under your leadership, I helped negotiate a strategic partnership with Afghanistan. We should be keeping the terms of that strategic partnership agreement, not giving priority to an agreement with the Taliban that has failed in every respect.

So, therefore, I think it's very clear that the United States is losing credibility in Afghanistan and losing credibility around the world. This agreement doesn't make us safer. It's what makes the world more dangerous to the United States. It makes us weaker and allows our adversaries in China and Russia to claim that the United States is weak and can be outlasted.

This is a real strategic loss for the United States.

Judy Woodruff:

This is a conversation...

(CROSSTALK)

Douglas Lute:

I just simply disagree.

Judy Woodruff:

I — we hear you, and this is a conversation that I know we are going to be continuing. But we thank the three of you, David Sedney, Ambassador Lute and Annie Pforzheimer.

Thank you very much.

Annie Pforzheimer:

Thank you for having us.